Will Greater Acknowledgement of Lifelong Learning in Civil Society Organisations Alter the Relationship between the State and Civil Society?

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Around the mid-1990s, governments in, for instance, Western Europe began to adjust their education policies towards the ideal of lifelong learning, as then re-introduced onto the educational agenda by transnational organisations such as the OECD. The policies drafted and adopted for this purpose encompass a view over learning that extends beyond the classroom and into people’s everyday lives, making the learning occurring in civic activity a specific topic of interest. For instance, in Finland learning in civic activity has been identified as one of the main areas of lifelong learning policy.

The learning that occurs within civil society organisations seems to benefit participants at least to some extent in the way policy-makers wish. The two main goals of lifelong learning as envisioned by the European Union include (among other aims such as personal fulfilment) employability and active citizenship. Participation enhances in particular so-called ‘soft’ or ‘generic’ skills such as teamwork and communication, which are said to be in great demand in today’s labour market; moreover, civic participation equips the individual with both theoretical and practical knowledge and skills concerning society and citizenship, with the added benefit of strengthening social capital. Governments see voluntary organisations as a little-exploited resource and wish to promote lifelong learning in their realm through contracts, grants, learning accreditation schemes and other means. But will this affect the relationship between the state and civil society?

Drawing on empirical data and examples and findings regarding the role of the third sector under welfare mix –style social policy, this paper will discuss the relationship between the state and civil society from the point of view of lifelong learning, taking into account both the learning practices themselves and the policy dimension. The empirical data are based on a survey conducted in Finland (N=571) and Great Britain (N=218) the aim of which was to explore civil society organisations’ experiences and views of lifelong learning both at the practical and at the ideological level. The results add to the common understanding of civil society organisations being a rich learning environment and an excellent springboard for active citizenship, regardless of organisation type, and that the majority of organisations consider the educational worth of their activities to be relatively high. Yet, there are some, mainly country-specific, differences in practices and attitudes regarding the policy dimension of lifelong learning, i.e. to what extent the values presented by policy-makers in various documents are reflected by practitioners working in the field, who are mainly volunteers themselves as well. There are similarities as well, for instance in both Finland and the UK the more organisations agree with the idea that the educational activities of civil society organisations should be controlled to a greater extent, the more willing they also were to contribute more to the provision of lifelong learning opportunities.

As regards the lifelong learning opportunities provided by civil society organisations, there are many lessons to be learned from the field of social policy, especially since one of the main aims of lifelong learning policy is to promote equality and social cohesion. Many of the attempts to include civil society organisations in the world of lifelong learning through, for example, the accreditation of the learning that occurs in them, have so far been less systematic; hence, there is room for making predictions about the way in which lifelong
learning policy may or may not contribute towards the ongoing redefinition of the role between the state and civil society.